

HONEYEATERS OF THE SUNSET COUNTRY

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In the far NW. corner of Victoria there are still extensive tracts of Mallee in their virgin state. Nevertheless, these are only remnants of what was originally a vast area known locally as 'The Sunset'. The exact boundaries were somewhat indefinite but, for the purposes of this discussion, it can be regarded as having been bounded on the north by what is now the Sturt Highway and on the south by the Ouyen Highway, while it extended from the 142 meridian in the east to the South Australian border in the west.

During the last 45 years serious inroads have resulted from closer settlement, particularly in the north where the present boundary of the Sunset is at least 20 miles S. of the Sturt Highway, and in the south where an irregular and less well-defined boundary is now some 12 to 15 miles to the north of the Ouyen Highway. Cultivation and clearing of the Mallee along the E. and the W. edges of the Sunset have been less severe but none the less persistent and relentless.

Until comparatively recent times, the remainder of the Sunset has been regarded by the public generally as useless, and little or no interest had been taken in it by State Departmental bodies. With the awakening of public interest and the growing demand for more and more land to be opened up for grazing and pastoral purposes, it behoves all those interested in Natural History and the preservation of natural habitats to plan now for adequate reservations throughout the Sunset.

The greatest danger, apart from the complete and final destruction of habitats by clearing, is fire. Unfortunately, when outbreaks do occur, they are usually ignored and nothing is done to prevent or control the blaze until private property or crops are endangered. In the meantime, valuable timber is lost, rare fauna and flora suffer irreparable damage, and unique habitats are destroyed.

The loss of habitats is indeed serious, as it threatens the very existence of such indigenous birds and mammals as are fortunate enough to survive in the small pockets of scrub which escape the fire. Unfortunately, owing to the low rainfall and sand drifts, regeneration is painfully slow.

Three large and extensive fires in the Sunset over the past five years have had disastrous effects and should be taken as a serious warning of what can happen in the future.

The Sunset supports an amazing variety of species ranging from the Emu, *Dromaius novae-hollandiae*, and the Mallee Fowl, *Leipoa ocellata*, on the one hand to the diminutive Mallee Emu-Wren, *Stipiturus mallee*, on the other. In the open forests where large timber and belts of pine and belar flourish, parrots and cockatoos are well represented. They too are being adversely affected, not only by loss of habitat resulting from clearing, but also because their breeding hollows are destroyed by timber men and wood-cutters from year to year. Birds of prey, both diurnal and nocturnal, inhabit suitably timbered flats and ridges which occur throughout the area.

However, the main objective of this paper is to review the status of one family of birds occurring in the Sunset, namely the Honeyeaters and, as they belong to the most numerous and widely distributed group of birds on the Australian continent, it is not surprising that so many varied forms have been recorded from this comparatively small and restricted section of the Mallee. Of the 69 species recognized in the *Checklist of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union* (1926 ed.), 34 have been recorded in the State of Victoria and, of these, no less than 18 have also been recorded from the Sunset. It is interesting to note in passing that all of these species, except one, have been known to breed in the Sunset. The 18 species to which I refer are as follows:

- 578 *Meliphreptus lunatus*—White-naped Honeyeater
- 583 *M. brevirostris*—Brown-headed Honeyeater
- 585 *Plectorhyncha lanceolata*—Striped Honeyeater
- 589 *Myzomela nigra*—Black Honeyeater
- 593 *Gliciphila melanops*—Tawny-crowned Honeyeater
- 594 *G. albifrons*—White-fronted Honeyeater
- 602 *Certhionyx variegatus*—Pied Honeyeater
- 608 *Meliphaga virescens*—Singing Honeyeater
- 617 *M. leucotis*—White-eared Honeyeater
- 620 *M. cratitia*—Purple-gaped Honeyeater
- 622 *M. ornata*—Yellow-plumed Honeyeater
- 623 *M. plumula*—Yellow-fronted Honeyeater
- 625 *M. penicillata*—White-plumed Honeyeater
- 631 *Meliornis novae-hollandiae*—Yellow-winged Honeyeater
- 635 *Myzantha flavigula*—Yellow-throated Miner
- 636 *Myzantha obscura* = *Melanotus*—Dusky Miner
- 638 *Anthochaera carunculata*—Red Wattle-Bird
- 640 *Acanthagenys rufogularis*—Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater

There are two other species reputed to have occurred in the Sunset but, although I shall record them on the authority of A. G. Campbell, I think they can only be listed tentatively pending confirmation, viz.:

- Grantiella picta*—Painted Honeyeater
- Myzantha melanocephala*—Noisy Miner

The Painted Honeyeater has an interesting distribution, taking in the greater part of New South Wales to the east of the Darling R., and extending in Victoria to the N. central sector of the State, the W. plains and to the north-east of Melbourne, but it appears to miss the Mallee in the north-west.

The general distribution of the Noisy Miner, on the other hand, would suggest this species as a more likely candidate for inclusion in a list of Sunset Honeyeaters, but I have yet to find a suitable habitat for *M. melanocephala* within the defined area, and Campbell's record appears to be based on a record from Pine Plains, at least 30 miles to the south of the Sunset.

Having regard to the highly developed migratory characteristics of most species of Honeyeaters, it is not surprising that there is considerable variation in the numerical strength of the various species from time to time, and in the number of species themselves inhabiting the area at any particular time.

Residential species are few and residential individuals even fewer, as the populations of the various species change with the rise and fall of the intensity of migratory movements.

The White-eared Honeyeater, *M. leucotis*, is undoubtedly the outstanding example of residential groups, as the individuals themselves are residents in the strictest sense of the term. They inhabit the same fixed territory from year to year and the breeding pairs usually build their nests within a defined and rather restricted

area each season. Their numbers, too, are static and they appear to be unable to adapt themselves to changing conditions when their habitat is destroyed.

The genus *Meliphaga* to which they belong is strongly represented, accounting for one-third of the total species listed above. Natural permanent water is practically non-existent in the Sunset, but here and there bores, wells, and tanks have been constructed. In such environments, small groups of White-plumed Honeyeaters, *M. penicillata*, have become established and, although some birds are nearly always present, it is fairly safe to assume from their varying numbers that only a very small percentage, if any, are really permanent residents. But, so long as the water lasts, so do the White-plumed remain. In contrast with their more robust relative, the White-eared, which is fairly evenly distributed wherever low dense cover is available, the distribution of the White-plumed is broken and patchy.

It is over 50 years since the first Yellow-fronted Honeyeaters, *M. plumula*, were recorded from Victoria in the vicinity of Murrayville. In more recent times, however, they have become established as residents in the far W. sector of the Sunset, some 20 miles to the north-east of Pinnaroo. Some 10 years ago a pair was located by Mr Roy Ribbons and, since then, the colony has grown until at present there are at least 60 resident breeding pairs in the colony.

This is a hardy species of which there appear to be two major populations—one in the dry interior of the south-west of Western Australia and the other, separated by the Nullarbor Plain, covers most of South Australia and a small portion of the far NW. corner of New South Wales. There are only a few scattered records to the east of the Darling R., yet its closest affinities, *M. flavescens*, the Yellow-tinted Honeyeater, and *M. flava*, the Yellow Honeyeater, are virtually coastal forms, extending in the case of the Yellow-tinted from the Fitzroy R. in the Kimberleys to Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria, and in the case of the Yellow Honeyeater, from the tip of Cape York to the Tropic of Capricorn.

It is interesting to observe the definite and comparable break in the distribution of these two species formed by the dry W. slopes of Cape York itself. Having observed all three species in the field, one cannot help but be impressed by the similarity of their appearance and their behaviour. Nevertheless, there is, even in this closely allied group within the genus, a remarkable difference in the eggs of these three species. Those of the Yellow-fronted more closely resemble typical sets of the Purple-gaped Honeyeater, *M. cratitia*, and the Yellow-tufted Honeyeater, *M. melanops*, and are usually two in number although three have occasionally been recorded. The eggs of the Yellow-tinted are smaller and of a paler pink. Of 13 nests taken by H. Barnard and General F. Hill for H. L. White on the McArthur R. in Northern Territory, 12 of them contained the full set of one egg only, the other being a set of two. On the other hand, the Yellow Honeyeater's clutch is almost invariably two and the eggs are among the most beautiful and easily distinguished eggs of all the Honeyeaters, being lavishly and boldly decorated with rich pink markings on a lighter and delicate pinkish base.

Another colony of Yellow-fronted Honeyeaters was recently located to the north-east of Panitya but, so far, it is not known whether or not it has become permanently established.

Of the remaining three members of *Meliphaga*, namely *virescens*, *cratitia*, and *ornata*, the Singing Honeyeater has the greatest range in so far as it occurs in the west and the drier portions of practically the whole of our continent, yet it is by no means plentiful in the Sunset, and shows a preference for the more open flats where isolated clumps of shrubs dot the landscape. Their eggs are of such a uniform pink that it is difficult at times to detect the presence of the egg of the Pallid

Cuckoo, *Cuculus pallidus*, when the nest of this Honeyeater has fallen a victim to the Cuckoo.

Throughout their entire range, the distribution of the Purple-gaped and the Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters is almost identical, but that of the latter is somewhat more extensive, especially in Western Australia. Although both species are virile migrants, seasonal movements and fluctuations in the numbers of *M. ornata* are much stronger than those of *M. cratitia*. In good seasons the Yellow-plumed Honeyeaters appear in flocks throughout the year. The Purple-gaped Honeyeater enjoys a more restricted local habitat and has never appeared in such vast numbers as the Yellow-plumed. No other genus in the Sunset is represented by more than two species.

The first of the three genera in which two species are represented is *Melithreptus*. It was not until September 1964 that the White-naped Honeyeater, *M. lunatus*, was first recorded in the far SW. corner of the Sunset by Mr Roy Ribbons. In company with Mr Ribbons and Mr H. Morton, I visited several sectors of the country to the north of Tutye and located many colonies, thus proving that the invasion was an extensive one. but the birds did not remain long and within the ensuing three weeks they had left the various districts visited by them. This is the only Honeyeater of the Sunset which does not breed within its confines.

Its co-gener, the Brown-headed Honeyeater, *M. brevirostris*, is a plain drab bird in comparison, and is so inconspicuous that it would often pass unnoticed but for its persistent rowdy and piercing call. It breeds throughout its range. The Brown-headed Honeyeaters are gregarious by nature and tend to congregate in small family flocks like all other members of the genus. They are too frequently chosen as foster parents by the Pallid Cuckoo.

The Tawny-crowned Honeyeater, *Gliciphila melanops*, and the White-fronted Honeyeater, *G. albifrons*, are the two representatives of the typical heath dwellers. Their appearances throughout the Malce are sporadic so far as *melanops* is concerned but more of a seasonal event in the case of *albifrons*, the former usually occurring in restricted numbers, and the latter in great force when favourable conditions prevail.

Their habits, their calls, and their ecology in general is less varied than one finds in the various species of *Meliphaga*. The observer has no difficulty whatsoever in realizing that these two species are so closely related. Both lay eggs of a similar size and lacking in colour, being almost white with few markings. Their nesting sites are almost identical, as both species prefer to build in the top of a porcupine bush or low down at the base of a mallee shrub. Some years ago, I found a nest of *G. albifrons* which contained two fresh eggs of the Honeyeater and one of the Horsfield Bronze Cuckoo, *Chalcites basalis*.

The Yellow-throated Miner, *Myzantha flavigula*, is very plentiful throughout the Sunset and is found wherever big timber, pine, and bejar still stand. It is the common Miner of the Malce and is easily identified by the conspicuous white rump which can be seen at quite a considerable distance.

The other Miner of the Mallee, known as the Dusky Miner, *M. obscura*, has always been a comparatively rare bird. It should not be confused with another bird bearing the same name and being of Western Australian origin. The Dusky Miner of Western Australia and of Eyre Peninsula in South Australia is a subspecies of the Yellow-throated Miner. Despite the excellent work by Mr H. Condon in dealing with the nomenclature of these two species, some ornithologists still confuse them.

During the last 10 years, the numerical strength of the Dusky Miner in the Sunset has deteriorated alarmingly. Destruction of its habitat has had a disastrous effect upon its survival. Large areas of country N. from Underbool to Murrayville, where these birds were formerly plentiful, have been cleared. These Miners do not appear to have established themselves on the Sunset fringes N. of the clearing, and they have disappeared entirely from many of their former territories N. of Panitya. The small breeding colony near the Hattah Lakes is now only a fraction of what it was in 1952.

In Victoria, the Dusky Miner is sharing with the Helmeted Honeyeater, *M. cassidix*, the doubtful distinction of being our rarest Honeyeater. Even outside the Sunset the habitat of *M. obscura* is very restricted and it is obvious that only prompt and constructive conservation of habitat can prevent further loss.

Identification in the field is simplified by the complete lack of the white rump which gives this bird the appearance of being uniform in colour from the nape of the neck almost down to the tip of the tail.

In Victoria, the Red Wattle Bird, *Anthochaera carunculata*, is so well known that further comment would seem unnecessary. It has adapted itself very well in the dry NW. corner of our State where it reaches the limit of its range in Victoria. During the breeding season their harsh raucous calls dominate all others in the more heavily timbered portions of the Mallee. In the springtime their numbers are greatly augmented but a small percentage remains throughout the autumn and winter periods. Their stick nests are usually built in open situations, varying from 2 ft to 12 ft from the ground, but occasionally a cleverly concealed nest may be hidden away in a clump of mistletoe or built in a thick cluster of young mallee shoots. Two eggs of rich salmon, boldly blotched, constitute the usual clutch, but one remarkable set of three was deposited in the hollowed-out top of the nest of a White-browed Babbler, *Pomatostomus superciliosus* at a height of 30 ft from the ground.

That was the only occasion on which I have ever recorded the Wattlebird usurping the nest of another species. Unfortunately this nest was deserted and when I visited it the following week the eggs had disappeared.

The remaining 4 Honeyeaters of the Sunset are the Black (*Myzomela nigra*), the Yellow-winged (*Meliornis novae-hollandiae*), the Spiny-cheeked (*Acanthagenys rufogularis*), and the Pied Honeyeater (*Certhionyx variegatus*). The first two are the sole representatives of their respective genera occurring in the Sunset and the latter two are monotypic.

The Black Honeyeater is by far the smallest of the Honeyeaters to visit NW. Victoria. They are regular annual migrants to the Sunset in small numbers, but at irregular intervals there are spectacular invasions when the birds arrive in considerable force. There are rarer instances when the migrating birds run into many thousands and, on these occasions, they invade the whole of N. Victoria.

Black Honeyeaters are quiet and somewhat secretive in their movements, being rather difficult to locate under normal circumstances. During the breeding season, however, they indulge in extensive display and the high pitched plaintive call of the male can be heard for a considerable distance. While he is calling and indulging in fancy acrobatic flights, the female is quietly and busily engaged either with nest building or brooding eggs and young. The migratory flights of Black Honeyeaters are probably nocturnal as I have never seen them arrive nor witnessed their departure.

Only a few favoured localities along the S. fringes of the Sunset to the north and the north-west of Cowangie are visited annually by a few pairs of Yellow-

winged Honeyeaters, *M. novae-hollandiae*. Usually they begin nesting shortly after their arrival and depart again soon after they have reared their brood. They no doubt come from the south where they are more plentifully distributed in the Big and Little Desert country. During the autumn, single birds are likely to be seen wherever acacia and broom-bush flourish. It is rather an interesting characteristic of this particular species, especially as individual Yellow-wings are sometimes recorded in unexpected and sometimes most unlikely places in Victoria N. of the Great Divide.

Spiny-checked Honeyeaters, *A. rufogularis*, are affected less by habitat than many of the other species under consideration. They can and do adapt themselves to changing conditions and are still plentiful and thriving in districts where the most ruthless methods of clearing have been adopted. Their adaptability is undoubtedly assisted by their ability to make the best of any suitable breeding site available. They nest just as freely in a citrus or olive grove, in ornamental garden shrub or peppercorn, as they do in native mallee trees and shrubs.

The Pied Honeyeater, *C. variegatus*, is the rarest Honeyeater in the Sunset and is seldom recorded. The unique discovery of a breeding pair at Manya by W. Burgess on 7 October 1946 has never been repeated.

Although Honeyeaters generally are fond of nectar and are lovers of flowering gums and shrubs, they are nevertheless essentially insectivorous, and it is not until there are ample supplies of insects available for them that widespread breeding takes place.

Extensive areas are needed to support Honeyeaters, apart altogether from suitable breeding habitats, and every effort should be made to support those organizations interested in the preservation of substantial areas in their natural state in the Sunset. It is most desirable that several large compact areas should be set aside as reserves and active steps taken to deal promptly and effectively with ever-present fire hazards in particular.

References

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